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ABSTRACT

This longitudinal study examined elementary teachers' perceptions of the collaborative planning and decision-making process and their role in it. Nine teachers participated in grade- level teaming. Teachers ranged in experience from 1-9 years, with 3 teachers new to the team and 5 in their first or second year of teaching. Participants completed interviews regarding their definitions and perceptions of: team teaching, team functioning, teacher roles in shared decision making, and the evolving roles of team members due to personnel changes. Teachers were observed during team planning meetings. Most agreed on a definition of teaming. The group was very diverse, with many strong personalities. Team members varied in perceptions of and reactions to teaming. The four team veterans formed two subgroups. Two considered the most important benefit of teaming to be sharing ideas and getting new teaching materials and activities, and two had two very divergent opinions. The two experienced novices were still seeking their roles but identified with a subgroup. The three outside veterans brought their experiences on other teams to bear and did not align with subgroups, instead seeking their own role and working for improved functioning on the team. Teachers differed in their views of changes on the team. (Contains 20 references.) (SM)

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ED 447 134

Running Head: COLLABORATIVE PLANNING

Collaborative planning and decision making in the elementary school: A qualitative study of contemporary team teaching

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Abstract

This study is a longitudinal case study of collaborative planning and decision making in a grade level team of elementary teachers. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of team members regarding the evolution of the planning and decision-making processes of an elementary grade level team during planning meetings, and their role in it.

Nine female elementary teachers in a suburban school district in the mid-South participated in this study. They ranged in experience from one to nine years. One teacher was African-American, the others were Caucasian. Three of the nine members were new to the team that year, although each had previous teaching experience on instructional teams in the district. Five of the nine teachers on the team were in their first or second year of membership on this team.

The researcher interviewed team members with regard to their perceptions of team teaching in general; the functioning of this team in particular, their role in shared decision-making, and their perceptions of the evolving roles of team members due to changes in personnel. The researcher also observed the teachers during their regular team planning meetings -- Monday afternoons and Wednesday mornings during the students' physical education period. The team captain conducted both of these meetings. During these meetings, the researcher compiled field notes on discussion topics and actions toward consensus and decision-making.

Collaborative planning and decision making in the elementary school: A qualitative study of contemporary team teaching

Since the school reform era began with the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, much attention has been focused on improving the quality of teaching. Included in this focus has been the quality of teachers entering the profession, the quality professional development opportunities for teachers, and the quality of the environment in which teachers work. One aspect of this discussion has centered on the need for collaboration between teachers as a means of improving the professional life of the teacher, described as isolated and lacking in professional interaction (Goodlad, 1984; Holmes Group, 1986).

In the 1970's collaboration at the elementary level took the form of team teaching. In these settings, two to five teachers were assigned to teach all subjects to 50 to 150 students, frequently in open space classrooms (Goddu, 1975; Sterns, 1977). Many of these attempts were abandoned because their adoption was a top-down decision not supported with adequate preparation (Goodlad, 1984). Collaboration in the elementary school has taken a different form in recent years. Instructional teams at the elementary school level may now consist of all the teachers at a given grade level, each responsible for a separate classroom of students, but meeting together to plan instruction and carry out grade level administrative tasks (Lambert, 1995; Shields, 1997). This type of collaboration is the focus of this study.

Purpose of the Study

The present study examined the collaborative planning and decision making of a grade level team of elementary school teachers over an eighteen-month period. The purpose of this study was to examine the evolution of the planning and decision-making processes of an

elementary grade level team during planning meetings, and the perceptions of team members regarding the process and their role in it. The analysis of these data was intended to provide insight into team decision-making as practiced in this situation, as well as the relative roles of veteran and novice teachers. Knowledge gained from this study is intended to guide future study into the perceptions held by team members about their team, their roles on the team, and the effects that this type of collaboration has on their teaching. Eventually insights into this new form of team teaching can be integrated into teacher preparation programs.

Research Questions

Questions that this study is intended to answer include:

1. How do teachers define team teaching?
2. How do personnel changes and differences in teaching philosophy and style affect team decision-making?
3. How does team planning benefit teachers, and how can it be improved to better meet their needs?

As a case study, this investigation does not purport to generalize to other situations. Instead, it is an attempt to provide a rich source of data about how elementary school teachers work together to make decisions and plan curriculum for their students.

Related Research

Teacher collaboration has taken different forms at different levels of schooling. Institutional structures at the middle and high school level have provided the impetus for collaboration in those settings, while elementary schools have used a variety of plans for teacher collaboration.

Collaboration in middle schools has taken the form of interdisciplinary teams, a group of

teachers teaching their subject matter specialities to a common core of students, using a common planning time to coordinate activities, deal with problem students, and integrate curriculum (Erb & Doda, 1989; McQuaide, 1992; Schumacher, 1995; Martin, 1995). In high schools, departments made up of subject matter specialists have developed and implemented curriculum within their disciplines (Siskin, 1990; Siskin, 1994; Siskin & Warren, 1995), and attempts at curriculum integration have also been made (Pettus, 1994). At both the middle and high school levels, subject matter specialization is a critical variable in collaboration. The middle school model attempts to eliminate barriers between subject areas through the interdisciplinary team, while the high school focuses on the content expertise of teachers through the departmental organization.

At the elementary school level, collaboration had been attempted prior to the current school reform era (Sowers, 1968; Goddu, 1975; Moody & Amos, 1975; Sterns, 1977). Many elementary schools experimented with team teaching – placing several teachers in simultaneous contact with a group of students, frequently through creating open space classrooms – in the 1960's and 1970's. In these settings, two to five teachers were assigned to teach all subjects to 50 to 150 students. In the best of these settings, teachers took on differentiated instructional roles, some with small groups, some with large groups, some working one-on-one. In other settings, teachers taught as they always had, without the benefit of walls between classrooms. These approaches were in large part abandoned by the end of the 1970's in response to the "back-to-basics" movement and the realization on the part of many educators that many children needed the stability of an individual teacher for most of their instruction.

A more contemporary approach to team teaching in the elementary school acknowledges the shortcomings of the open space teaming model and leaves students in self-contained

classrooms. Teaming takes place through the use of a common planning time (a device borrowed from the middle school model) during which time teachers collaborate on administrative issues and curriculum (Lambert, 1995). Little research on this form of team teaching has been published, but its potential has not gone unnoticed.

The value of collaboration as a means of enhancing teachers' continuing professional development is one focus of a major report of the U.S. Department of Education (1999). The report, which includes data from a nation-wide survey of teachers, criticizes traditional professional development opportunities for teachers, such as workshops and conferences, because they lack connection to the classroom. In addition to mentoring and induction programs for new teachers, peer collaboration "has been heralded by teachers, researchers and policy makers as essential to teachers' continuous learning." (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p. 28).

Teachers surveyed for the USDOE study reported a high incidence of regularly scheduled collaboration with other teachers, including "a common planning period for *team* teachers [emphasis added] (USDOE, 1999, p. 30). The nature of team teaching assumed in this report is not stated, so it is unclear if teachers who share only a common planning time are considered team teachers. Thus the prevalence of a common planning period during which elementary teachers collaborate on curriculum planning is not established. Regardless, 40% of teachers who did participate in team planning during a common planning time believed that this collaboration helped their teaching a lot.

The day-to-day work of contemporary team teaching approaches in the elementary school has been the subject of few studies. Shields (1997) reports that successful team collaboration not only requires administrative support, but also hinges on personality traits and positive interaction

between team members. Honesty, flexibility, the ability to communicate, and confidence were contributors to team success. Egotism, cynicism, and non-cooperation were personality traits associated with unsuccessful teams.

Team Teaching, a project of the Northern Nevada Writing Project Teacher-Researcher Group (1996) provides rich anecdotal data. A Nevada law mandating a 16-1 pupil-teacher ratio in grades 1-3 resulted in many teachers undertaking team teaching arrangements. Most elementary teachers in this study were paired with another teacher in the same room, so the collaboration was closer and more intense than simply sharing a common planning time.

Collaboration among teachers in elementary schools is advocated by many, but has been studied by few. Riley (1999) studied the level and types of participation by elementary teachers in team planning meetings. In this case study, veteran teachers dominated discussions and led the team through the force of their personalities. No other study of collaborative planning by teachers who maintain their own self-contained classroom has been found. Such a study might help to provide insight into the benefits and pitfall of such an arrangement. One fertile area of interest would be the roles played by veteran and novice teachers in team planning, and the effects such arrangement have on the professional development of all teachers on the team.

Methodology

Subjects

Nine female elementary teachers teaching at Fountain Valley School, a large elementary (K-5) school in a suburban school district in the mid-South, participated in this study. They ranged in experience from one to nine years. One teacher was African-American, the others were Caucasian. Three of the nine members were new to the team that year, although each had previous teaching experience in the district. Five of the nine teachers on the team were in their

first or second year of membership on this team. Team member demographics are presented in Table One.

The team is one of two looping teams at Fountain Valley; i.e., it follows a group of fourth grade students for more than one year, through the end of the fifth grade. In the fall, the team would receive a new set of fourth-grade students who would be with the team for the next two years.

Table One

The team was selected for study after consultation with area principals. It presented a wide disparity of teaching experience levels, a sufficient mix of veteran and novice teachers to examine the contributions of each, significant experience with this form of team teaching, and the potential of examining the evolution of team functioning over a period of time, due to personnel changes for the upcoming school year. Two veteran teachers chose to stay home with young children and one received a transfer to another grade level team within the building.

Data Collection

Data were collected by using case study methods outlined by Stake (1995). The researcher interviewed team members with regard to their perceptions of team teaching in general; the functioning of this team in particular, their role in shared decision-making, and their perceptions of the evolving roles of team members due to changes in personnel. The interview questions are presented in Table Two. Interviews were tape-recorded, and transcripts of the interviews were prepared. Responses that directly addressed the research questions of this paper

were analyzed for common themes, similarities, and differences.

The researcher also observed the teachers during their regular team planning meetings – Monday afternoons after school and Wednesday mornings during the students' physical education period. The team captain conducted both of these meetings. During these meetings, the researcher compiled field notes on discussion topics and actions toward consensus and decision-making. These field notes were not formally analyzed in this paper.

Table Two

Discussion

Defining Team Teaching

To determine if the team possessed a common understanding of team teaching, each teacher was asked to define the term. Seven of the nine teachers agreed on a definition that reflected their current position, emphasizing the sharing of ideas and plans, "bouncing ideas off each other," and then going back to their classrooms to implement what they had planned. Some admitted that their definition of team teaching had changed as a result of their experience at Fountain Valley. Only two teachers defined team teaching differently, and both expressed it in terms of two or more teachers sharing the responsibility for a group of students.

Beyond a common understanding of teaming, the teachers on this team varied in their perceptions and reactions to their work together. The differences can be traced to individual teachers' history with the team and the school. In terms of experience, the Fountain Valley team

could be said to be made up of three groups of teachers. Team Veterans (TV) had spent more than three years as a member of the team. Outside Veterans (OV) had extensive teaching experience but were in their first year of teaching on this team. Experienced Novices (EN) had less experience than either group of veteran teachers, but had more experience on this team than the OV's. The four TV's are Lynn Taylor, the current team captain, and Marsha Curry, Anne Melton, and Julie Smith. The three OV's are Donna Davis, Pat Lynch, and Anne Wall. The two EN's are Brenda May and Pam Russell.

The four TV's began their work on this team when the team captain was Kathy Henry, who they agreed provided dynamic, energetic, witty leadership for four years before resigning to stay home with her newborn baby. The TV's stated that Kathy Henry led by the sheer force of her personality. Marsha Curry stated, "Kathy was a natural leader. Even when she wasn't the leader she really was. I think Kathy worked really hard to try to make sure everybody liked everybody. She really worked hard at that, and it took its toll on her because it was a tough thing to do." New Team Captain Lynn Taylor remembered that "it just seemed like to me, when I first started, for the most part we all seemed to really work well together. It was a great mix."

They also appreciated the quiet leadership of Susan Collins, another veteran teacher who resigned to stay home with a child. Anne Melton commented,

> One thing about Kathy – and Susan too – neither one of them would keep things hidden. They wouldn't say it behind your back; they'd say it to your face. I think that's important, to be honest: "What's going on here? What are you doing?" They brought everything to the table. I think disagreements were more open. We discussed them and we respected each other.

Benefits of Team Planning

The four TV's were not united in their perceptions of the benefits of teaming. Two of them, Lynn Taylor (the new team captain) and Julie Smith, viewed the most important benefit of

team planning as sharing ideas and getting specific new materials and activities to use in teaching. The other two diverged in their opinions, with Marsha Curry seeing curriculum organization as the main benefit to her. Anne Melton perceives the sharing of insights into content and how children think about content as most beneficial.

The three OV's were seen as acclimating themselves to the dynamics of this team in contrast to previous team experiences. All saw the greatest benefit of teaming as the providing of support and confidence that comes from knowing others are facing the same issues and having the same problems, but each stated her view in a slightly different way. Anne Wall pointed out that "when you team with someone else, you have that check of approval from someone, the sort of checks and balances of it all. It gives me more confidence in what I'm doing because I've shared."

Pat Lynch reflected on her teaming experience at another school in the district:

> If you fail terribly, somebody's going to be there hopefully to pick you up and continue to cheer you on. Especially when you've had an extremely difficult child, and you've pulled out every trick in the book and you still cannot get through to that child, and your day has just been horrible, you go home thinking, "Why did I even decide to do this? Why did I even pick this career? Why am I really here?" There's always been somebody there for me to say, "You really are good at what you're doing. You may want to try this."

Donna Davis described how important that support can be when ideas meet with resistance. "Sometimes you put your head out there and you get chopped. You have to live to tell about it. You have to walk away from it unscathed. If you are damaged in some way, you have to hold your head up high, and say, 'Well maybe you're right.' "

The two EN's seem to align themselves with one of the other groups. Brenda May agreed with Anne Melton in seeing the greatest benefit in teaming as the discussions about the content to be taught, rather than the methods or activities to be used. Pam Russell is in

agreement with the three OV's, saying that support from experienced teachers who had faced similar problems gave her "a self-confidence boost, saying 'If they can do it, I can do it.' "

Dealing with Disagreements

In terms of how the team deals with disagreements and differences, six of the nine teachers, including five of the seven veteran teachers (TV's and OV's), stated that disagreements were present but not discussed openly. The three TV's who took this position noted that the previous team, under the leadership of Kathy Henry, did not have open disagreements. Anne Melton stated, "I don't think we've always been open about things that we disagreed on. You hear it through the grapevine on our team that there is a disagreement, but you never knew there was a disagreement."

The two OV's who took this position had both worked on other teams at Fountain Valley. They felt limited in their knowledge of what went on before they joined the team. Anne Wall commented that "obviously the people that were new to the team were missing something that happened last year that we didn't understand. But we could figure it out." One EN, Pam Russell, took the same position, stating that differences were "pushed back, not resolved then and there."

Two veteran teachers, Julie Smith (TV) and Pat Lynch (OV), voiced the view that team members simply agreed to disagree. Julie Smith also stated that differences in philosophy began to appear the previous year, when teachers conducted interviews for three vacant positions. She noted that teachers took strong stands in favor or against particular candidates, apparently based on their teaching philosophy. That idea was echoed by Brenda May, who did not otherwise directly address the question of disagreements. She stated that "the interviewing brought more to the head of philosophical differences . . . Some people were looking for more teachers that were

more aligned with their thinking."

Changes in the Team

When asked to characterize how the team had changed, six of the nine teachers identified changes in dynamics brought on by personnel changes and more open discussion of differences. A number of them pointed to a split in the team based on differing philosophies about teaching math. Pam Russell summed it up by saying, "It feels more kind of split; this side of the table and that side of the table. I didn't feel that much last year, maybe a little bit towards the end. This year it's kind of like, 'We're a team but we're two teams.' "

Some were optimistic that the team was taking steps to deal with these differences. Anne Melton commented that "it takes a while to trust each other and to know each other and to know each other's hearts. I think that is something that we're working through right now." Donna Davis saw that "that our fear factor is lessening. We're not as fearful of saying things now." But not everyone was as sanguine. Anne Wall viewed the opening of discussion on these issues as interfering with productivity.

The other teachers diverged in their view of changes on the team. Two teachers, including team captain Lynn Taylor, described the changes strictly in terms of changes in personnel. Lynn Taylor did not address the philosophical differences on the team in responding to this question. Finally, one of the OV's, Pat Lynch, with the shortened perspective of a new team member, saw the team as becoming more productive.

Meeting the Needs of Teachers

At first glance, the question of how the team could better meet the needs of the teachers on the team produced the greatest divergence of opinion. Experience and team history categories were not useful in analyzing the range of responses to this question.

Three teachers, Pam Russell, Julie Smith, and Anne Wall, wanted greater efficiency and productivity from team planning meetings. Anne Wall summed up their position: "I would like for us to walk away with something useful . . . it should just be running like clockwork a little bit more. That's what teaming is about is reducing the amount of individual work by doing it with other people. I would like to see that."

Two teachers, Pat Lynch and Brenda May, focused on team dynamics and interpersonal relationships as a key to meeting their needs. Brenda May stated, "I feel like if we could support each other more, and gain more trust in each other, then that would help me more than anything right now."

Two other teachers, Donna Davis and Anne Melton were most interested in shifting the focus of planning meetings to more substantive discussions of content and how children view content. Summing up their view, Anne Melton said she would like it "if we talked more about how children think, and discuss[ed] big ideas, and brought more research to the table."

Reflecting opposite ends of the same issue, Lynn Taylor stated that she wanted the team "just [to] be together, because that would make planning so much easier," while Marsha Curry wanted the team to be more flexible, particularly in terms of the ground rules the team established for team meetings. For example, she expressed disagreement with the rule that teachers should not take phone calls during the meeting, stating that the needs of her students and parents came first – "if we're all about the children, we need to take care of that."

However, a number of teachers expressed multiple actions that would be desirable for meeting their needs in response to this question. Four teachers, the two who identified substantive content discussions, and two of the three who preferred greater efficiency, also expressed the desire for better interpersonal relationships. In each case they expressed the

opinion that relationships between teachers on the team were the foundation for improving performance in other areas. Donna Davis summed up their position: "I think that, as a team, when we grow to become friends, that will help . . . that's going to be something that I look forward to. Trust – that's a real good word." Thus a total of six of the nine teachers viewed interpersonal relationships among teachers as an important component for team success.

Implications and Further Study

This instructional team had to grapple with the effects of extensive personnel changes in a relatively short period of time. At the time of the interviews, only four of the nine team members had been with the team longer than fifteen months. In addition to these changes, there has been a shift in leadership, from a strong, dynamic, natural leader, to a team captain without those qualities. Lynn Taylor was praised by her teammates for her hard work under difficult circumstances. But her responses to interview questions revealed less analysis of the forces at work on the team than that displayed by other team members. This was a highly diverse team with many strong personalities and opinions. For this team, it may have been that a team captain with more apparent natural or learned leadership qualities was necessary to lead it through this transition.

The four TV's apparently formed two subgroups, with Lynn Taylor and Julie Smith in agreement on basic issues, and Marsha Curry and Anne Melton pushing for changes. The two EN's, joining the team more recently, were still seeking their roles, but each identified herself with one of the two subgroups, Pam Russell with Lynn Taylor and Julie Smith, and Brenda May with Marsha Curry and Anne Melton. The three OV's brought their experience on other teams to bear. They did not align themselves with either of the subgroups, but sought their own role and working for improved functioning on the team. Because of their extensive experience

outside this team, this group seemed to hold the potential to move the team in the direction desired by team members – Donna Davis in content, Anne Wall in team dynamics, and Pat Lynch in productivity. Future interviews are planned to assess the team's success in negotiating this transition.

Previously, the researcher identified levels and types of interaction among team members during planning meetings (Riley, 1999). Collection of those data continues, and will be compared to previous interaction data in a future study. In addition, a third set of data are being collected: anecdotal field notes on team planning meetings. These data will be analyzed in an additional study. Finally, an attempt will be made to synthesize the three sources of data to provide a snapshot of this team at this point in its evolution.

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Table 1.

Teacher Demograhics

Teacher	Teaching Experience	Team Experience
Marsha Curry	4	3
Donna Davis	8	0
Pat Lynch	10	0
Brenda May	1	1
Anne Melton	6	6
Pam Russell	1	1
Julie Smith	3	3
Lynn Taylor	5	4
Anne Wall	8	0

Note: Team Experience = Number of years of experience on this team

Table 2

Interview Questions

1. How would you define team teaching?
2. Has your conception of team teaching changed since you became a part of this team? In what way?
3. How do you view your role on this team? How is that role different from your previous experience (other teams, other years)?
4. How has this team changed during the time you have been a part of it?
5. How does this team deal with disagreements? How has that changed?
6. What is the most important thing you have gained from team planning?
7. What impact (if any) has team planning had on your knowledge of subject matter?
8. What other planning do you do besides that done in team planning meetings?
9. Outside of team planning, do you usually plan alone, or with others?
10. In what ways could this team better meet your needs as a teacher?
11. What would be (has been) your reaction to a leadership role on this team?